



VOM ASYL ZUM KULTURORT

Es ergibt sich. Zu Besuch in der Werkhalle Wiesenburg

Das Atelier von Thomas bo Henriksson ist ein Magnet für die freie Kunstszene, seit die Existenz des Areals bedroht wurde

FROM SHELTER TO CULTURAL LOCATION

Elizabeth Wirth, Kaleidoskop, TAZ Blogs, 6.08.2022

He couldn't say no after seeing the room for the first time. Even if it was crazy: too big, too high, unheatable. The artist Thomas bo Henriksson could no longer escape the enchanted Wiesenburg. In the 18 years that have passed since then, the area has lost none of its charm, but rather gained even more. Places like the Wiesenburg have become rare in Berlin. They have been demolished, redeveloped and turned into expensive flats. At first glance, time seems to have given the premises by the Panke, not far from the Humboldthain, a wide, inconspicuous path. A wide, inconspicuous path that leads onto the site. Behind a gate, a little off the road, stands an old brick house. In front of it is a small garden, wildly overgrown parts of buildings, ruins where trees grow, workshops and sculptures along the way. At the far end, the Panke flows slowly and shallowly. Immediately, you have the feeling of a leap in time, as if you had travelled to Berlin in the 1990s or early 2000s. To an unrenovated city with a lot of space, a lot of vacancies, a lot of wasteland and a lot of niches. A time when artists and initiatives moved into empty spaces with cheap interim leases and revitalised neglected-looking neighbourhoods with their studios, galleries and project spaces. One could also say that they upgraded them. At second glance, one sees that the changes in the city have not stopped at the Wiesenburg. It is a little ironic that the Wiesenburg, which only began to open up when its existence was threatened, is today reminiscent of a different Berlin. That it emerged as a place for exhibitions, concerts and dance when others in the independent scene were disappearing.

Celebrated and ostracised

It was 125 years ago that well-heeled Berliners opened the Wiesenburg on Wiesenstraße in Wedding as a shelter for 700 homeless men. Berlin had grown rapidly in the second half of the 19th century, attracting more and more people in search of work. Housing was scarce. Homelessness was criminalised. The homeless were defamed as lazy bums and ruffraff. As early as 1868, inspired by Bertha Neumann, a group of wealthy Berliners around the banker Gustav Thölde had founded the Berlin

Association for the Homeless as "an institute of free social humanity and civic self-government". They wanted to have as little as possible to do with the municipal authorities or the police.

Among the supporters of the association were important Berliners such as the physician Rudolf Virchow, the dairy owner Carl Bolle, the entrepreneur August Borsig and the SPD politician Paul Singer, who later headed the Wiesenburg's men's shelter. "Social commitment," says the book *Die Wiesenburg. Geschichte eines besonderen Asyls* (History of a Special Shelter), they understood not as "charity, but as the duty of their group: a minimum of what the wealthy owe the poor". The association did not want to fundamentally change conditions. But it certainly wanted to improve them.

With the Wiesenburg, the association set new standards at the end of the 19th century. Those seeking shelter were granted the right to anonymity, they were treated in a friendly and humane manner, and hygienic standards were established: there was a washroom, a bathing room, a disinfection area. All surfaces were easy to clean, drinking water was boiled. The homeless could spend the night in the Wiesenburg a maximum of four times a month. In a real bed - not on a cot like in the municipal shelter, *Die Palme*. They had soup and rolls for dinner and coffee and a roll for breakfast. All this made the shelter so progressive that it received an award at the World's Fair in Paris in 1897. Ten years later, the Wiesenburg was extended to accommodate up to 400 women and children. The building services were now state of the art. For some, including the pastor Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, it was a thorn in the side. He considered institutions like this to be "one of the most dangerous and pernicious" in Europe. He led a veritable hate campaign at the beginning of the 20th century against the Wiesenburg and the association, which was an unwilling competitor of the pastor. Friedrich von Bodelschwingh headed the aid organisation *Bethel*, today the largest social enterprise in Europe, and took a somewhat different approach. He disliked the fact that people did not have to work for their shelter. To him, the Wiesenburg was "the biggest educational institution for vagabonds and criminals". In his opinion, the "loafers" should live outside the cities in workers' colonies and earn their living in all weathers. Bodelschwingh, a clever fundraiser, founded just such a place near Berlin shortly before his death in 1905.

After Paul Singer, the director of the Wiesenburg men's shelter, died in 1911 - hundreds of thousands are said to have honoured the friend of communist ideas with a funeral procession - the property was reallocated in 1912 and partly used commercially. For a few years at the during the 1920s, the Jewish community rented rooms for Jews who were fleeing Eastern European pogroms. In 1933, the National Socialists confiscated the association's assets, took over the premises and produced armaments here until a bomb destroyed the former men's dormitories in February 1945 and the Wiesenburg sank into a kind of Sleeping Beauty slumber for decades.

Escape to the front

Numerous rumours and stories have grown up around the Wiesenburg. The Captain of Köpenick is said to have stayed here, Rosa Luxemburg hid here. Schlöndorff and Fassbinder filmed here. The artist Heather Allen was in charge of the research, separating facts from anecdotes and collecting material. Until 2014, the Wiesenburg in the shadow of the railway line of the S-Bahn ring was a largely "hidden place", says Thomas bo Henriksson, who has had his studio here since 2004. Until carpenter and wood artist Peter Rintsch's death in 2019, they shared the former laundry rooms. In the adjoining room still stand the fantastic structures, half furniture, half exuberant sculpture, whose creation is a story in itself.

Then DEGEWO became the owner of the area. The tenants of the former administration building, the workshops and the studio, who had previously taken care of their rooms themselves, were no longer allowed to undertake renovations. The future became uncertain. They founded an association with the aim of preserving the Wiesenburg and developing it as a place for culture and history. The Wiesenburg began to open up and Thomas bo Henriksson's studio became an exhibition space. There were now also events next door in Isabelle Schad's Tanzhalle Wiesenburg. The association organised cultural festivals and panel discussions, offered guided tours of the grounds. "There was a lot of love from the politicians, a lot of press," recalls Thomas bo Henriksson. The association's strategy worked, the tenants became involved in the planning. In autumn 2021, when I visit the artist, it is cold. Ivy is growing through one of the windows, the roof is not completely sealed. We drink tea. It is not yet clear when the renovation will begin, Thomas bo Henriksson says. The new residents have already moved into the new buildings that have been erected on part of the site, where a wild little wood once grew among the ruins.

Let it happen

At the end of the 2021 season, a retrospective can be seen in the Wiesenburg. A lot of abstraction in various formats, a few drawings and prints, two installations. In addition to works by freelance artists, there are works by self-taught artists and children. Some of the works were created here, such as the metre-high champagne bottle wrapped in brown fabric in the middle of the room. Or the painting that Thomas bo Henriksson worked on alternately with Emil Holmer and Sophia Schama. With the group show of a total of 28 artists, Thomas bo Henriksson wants to show what has been going on since he opened his studio. And it gives an insight into the artistic concept of the exhibition space, which can be described with the words "let it happen". The changing exhibitions result from the artist's growing network. Every now and then, artists approach him and propose their works for an exhibition. "So far, all the proposals have been so good, I've never had to say no," he says and smiles. Over the last few years, the Werkhalle has also become an important venue for classical

and improvised music. When violist Shasta Ellenbogen stood in the high room for the first time, she was similarly impressed as Thomas bo Henriksson once was - especially by the acoustics. Since then, concerts have been held regularly, the boundaries between classical, jazz and improvised music are fluid. Here, too, Thomas bo Henriksson follows the attitude of letting things happen. Word has got around that there is someone here who opens his rooms to others.

When the workshop is too cold for visitors in winter, Thomas bo Henriksson comes to paint. Art was for him early on a sphere in which his "world was intact. I have always thought in pictures". Painting, he says, is an exploration, a following of changes, an attempt to bring together the seemingly incompatible. Representation and abstraction, fullness and minimalism, intellect and feeling. A few of his large-format paintings hang in the upper half of the Werkhalle. One of them is called Souvenir of Summer. He worked on it from 2014 to 2018. A process, full of "unsuccessful moments". The painting, he says, is full of mistakes. Today it is his favourite.

Winter Harvest is the name of the show currently on view. Thomas bo Henriksson shows pictures that were created after our conversation last autumn. In addition, an exhibition curated by Heather Allen gives insight into the eventful history of Wiesenburg. Concerts and the Classical Sundays series created by Shasta Ellenbogen also take place. This summer, Thomas bo Henriksson will only open the Werkhalle on the last weekend of each month. He could not imagine continuing as before after the war in Ukraine began. The shock was too great and he lacked the strength. Since the renovation of the Wiesenburg has been postponed until sometime in 2023, there will hopefully be another summer in the old workshop. He has already planned the programme, and Swedish painting will be on display then. Thomas bo Henriksson hopes that the renovation work will only take a few months. With a bit of luck, they were as taken with their first visit to Wiesenburg as Thomas bo Henriksson once was, and they will succeed in preserving the enchanted character.